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Title: Labouring in Silence: Young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer-Identifying Workers' Negotiations of the Workplace Closet in Australian Organizations

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Labouring in silence: Young lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying workers' negotiations of the workplace closet in Australian organisations.

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ABSTRACT

The workplace closet is a fundamental fixture in the working lives of many lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ)-identifying employees who do not feel safe for their sexual identity to be known in their place of employment. Previous research draws attention to the processes of identity management that some workers adhere to for ensuring that LGBQ sexual identities remain invisible during work-hours. While the stories of young workers have been largely absent from this field, this qualitative study sheds light on how younger employees (18-26 years) negotiate multiple closets within Australian work-cultures. The present study examines the concealing practices of younger people seeking to stay invisible as LGBQ employees across diverse work-settings. Findings illustrate how the workplace closet holds varying functions, both strategic and silencing, while providing young people with a protective space from

which to assess work-relationships and to decide if and how they discuss LGBTQ identities at work.

Key words: young *LGBTQ workers, workplace closet, sexual identity*

INTRODUCTION

As new players in a fragmented labour market, young people are situated in a workforce that cannot promise occupational certainty, job security or longevity (McDonald, Bailey, Oliver & Pini, 2007; White & Wyn, 2008). Young people participate in what can be described as ‘precarious employment’ in Western labour markets, signifying their frequent location in vulnerable positions of ‘low pay, employment insecurity and working-time insecurity’ (White & Wyn, 2008, p. 174). This trend is evident in the Australian labour market in which casual workers without access to sick or holiday entitlements tend to be overwhelmingly younger people, with 40% of casual employees aged 15-24 in 2007 (ABS, 2009). In parallel, young workers between 15 to 24 years are overrepresented in low-skilled and low-paid industries such as clerical, sales and service work in comparison to older age groups (ABS, 2006). The precariousness of youth employment can be heightened when factoring in sexuality as a source of social division and inequality.

Workplace studies from economically advantaged nations such as Australia, United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) convey a collective storyline of homophobic abuse, discrimination and harassment against LGBTQ-identifying employees (Asquith, 1999; Colgan, Creegan, McKearney & Wright, 2006; Hunt & Dick, 2008; Irwin, 1999; Ragins, Cornwell & Miller, 2003; Smith & Ingram, 2004). Within these studies, the workplace is discussed as a site of social inequality founded

on hierarchical divisions between heterosexual and non-heterosexual workers. These social divisions generate complex decisions for LGBTQ-identifying workers in negotiating the workplace closet on an everyday basis, bringing to the fore issues of ‘coming out’ and identity management (Anastas, 2001; Chrobot-Mason, Button & DiClementi, 2001; Clair, Beatty & Maclean, 2005; Day & Schoenrade, 1997, 2000; Ragins, Singh & Cornwell, 2007; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Woods & Lucas 1993). ‘Negotiating’ refers to the continuous process of decision-making about *if*, *when* and *how* to discuss non-normative sexual identities with other organisational participants, including colleagues and clients.

The majority of studies cited above are founded on self-reported accounts of anti-homosexual abuse and discrimination at work. McDermott (2006) notes that research in this field has a tendency to attract mainly white middle-class respondents located in professionalised occupations. The experiences of LGBTQ employees in lower socioeconomic employment or ‘blue-collar’ positions are under-represented. Likewise, the majority of studies cited above do not focus on age-specific cohorts or alternatively, focus on older sample groups with mean ages in the thirties and forties. Hence, the present study focuses on the experiences of younger people between the age of eighteen to twenty-six years who were engaged in paid employment on either a fixed (full-time and part-time) or non-fixed term basis (casual employment). Negotiating the closet in social settings such as the school, home or public street can be a significant stressor for many young LGBTQ people who report frequent encounters with homophobic abuse and bullying and heterosexist assumptions (Barron & Bradford, 2007; Hillier, Turner & Mitchell, 2005; Huebner, Rebchook & Kegeles, 2004; Hunt & Jensen, 2007; Russell, Franz & Driscoll, 2001). While the voices of young LGBTQ workers are conspicuously absent, several studies suggest that

LGBQ youth anticipate and experience discriminatory and abusive treatment in their work-relationships (Colgan et al, 2006; Emslie, 1999; Hillier et al, 2005).

In this paper, I illustrate the challenges of negotiating non-normative sexual identities at work and in particular, draw attention to the concealing practices undertaken by young people for the purpose of sustaining their invisibility as lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer-identifying (LGBQ) employees¹. The aim of this discussion is to shed light on how younger LGBQ employees negotiate the workplace closet in their place of employment and to expand on the ways in which younger employees negotiate LGBQ identities and same-sex relationships in comparison to older LGBQ workers. The findings presented are drawn from a qualitative enquiry undertaken in 2006 to explore the employment experiences of young LGBQ youth (18-26 years of age) within Australian workplaces. For the purpose of this discussion, work is defined as a process of formally contracted and paid labour performed within the workplace as a shared environment.

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The politics of disclosure and ‘coming out’ at work

Within the workplace literature, ‘coming out’ is recognised as a fundamental decision in the career paths of LGBQ-identifying workers (Humphrey, 1999; Ward & Winstanley, 2005, 2006). The politics of ‘coming out’, the social process of revealing individual conceptions about sexuality and self to others, can have momentous implications for the social and economic status of LGBQ-identifying workers. Deciding to disclose can be both beneficial and detrimental in consequence, highlighting the complexity of negotiating the disclosure process across the permeable divide between public workplaces and private worlds (Asquith, 1999; Schultz, 2003).

Reportedly, sexual disclosure at work reinforces attitudes of psychological commitment to the employing organisation; is associated with less conflict between work and home life and less likelihood of leaving; and is correlated with higher levels of job satisfaction (Day & Schoenrade, 1997; 2000). Numerous negative effects of living the ‘double life’ in the organisational closet are also reported such as: the impact on self-esteem and self-worth; less positive attitudes towards work and careers in comparison to ‘out’ employees; the physical and emotional strain of remaining in the closet; and, from a human resources perspective, a substantial amount of employee’s time and energy expended on staying invisible (Colgan et al, 2006; Ragins et al, 2007). Patterns of disclosure are dependent on external factors such as organisational climate, work-team culture, and the existence of equal opportunity policies (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002).

LGBQ-identifying workers may rely on a number of strategies for ‘passing’: intricate measures for camouflaging aspects of the sexual self and for posing as a member of the dominant heterosexual group (Clair et al, 2005). Strategies for ‘passing’ heavily rely on the presumption of heterosexuality and may involve strategies of concealment, such as dodging questions about one’s personal life or presenting oneself as ‘asexual’ (Chrobot-Mason et al, 2001; Woods & Lucas 1993). Performing heterosexuality for lesbian workers may entail the signification of conventional feminine markers, such as conversational references to marriage and childbearing (McDermott, 2006). All of these strategies can be stressful and exhausting to sustain and do not remove the threat of involuntary disclosure, or ‘outing’, from other employees (Badgett, 1996; Ward & Winstanley, 2005).

Silence is a persistent theme within the work-accounts of LBQ employees as an unspoken knowledge base in which what is left unsaid can be equally meaningful

as what is conveyed in spoken word. Silence can be sanctified at an organisational level, such as through the symbolic provision of uniforms and the masking of differences or by failing to recognise LGBQ employees and their relationships in human resources policy (Skidmore, 1999; Ward & Winstanley, 2003; 2006). ‘Coming out’ at work does not automatically dispel the pervasive power of sexual silence. The symbolic act of greeting co-workers ‘coming out’ with silence can imply resistance to the visible presence of LGBQ identities (Ward & Winstanley, 2003). Ward & Winstanley (2003) perceive the discourse of silence in the workplace as a contradictory position that is simultaneously empowering and oppressive for LGBQ-identifying workers - oppressive by cloaking lesbian and gay workers from visibility while empowering through having to avoid assuming a fixed subject position within a ‘heteronormative agenda’ (Ward & Winstanley, 2003).

Theoretical approach to the closet

The theoretical framework for this discussion is informed by queer and post-structural critiques of the closet. The metaphor of the closet, and the underpinning logic of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, has received considerable attention from gender and queer theorists over the last twenty years (Butler, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990). The closet metaphor is a recurring symbol attached to LGBQ identities in modern Western worlds, marking a socially constructed divide between heterosexual and homosexual identities (Butler, 1991; Fuss, 1991). It has also symbolised a space of shelter and protection from homosexual oppression by representing what Eve. K. Sedgwick (1990, p. 71) describes as the ‘defining structure for gay oppression’ in the twentieth century. This closet is synonymous with the coming out narrative and the political context of the gay liberation movement during

the 1970s (Grierson & Smith, 2005). Consequently, the coming out story has become part of a broader culture of storytelling about the sexual self in modernity (Plummer, 1995).

According to Judith Butler (1993, p. 225), the practice of naming, or ‘coming out’, is central to the formation of sexual subjectivities—a practice by which the authoritative voice of the speaker positions themselves as a particular sexual or gendered subject. Mason (2002) argues that lesbian and gay lives rarely live either in or out of the closet but rather negotiate its metaphorical borders daily. In this sense, the closet can be experienced as an unstable and unreliable space for sustaining sexual invisibility. It is also an inescapable space as each new encounter with an unfamiliar person brings with it the potential presumption of heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990).

In the context of contemporary North American society, Seidman et al (2002) assert that many LGBTQ individuals are living life ‘beyond the closet’. While recognising the institutionalisation of heterosexual dominance within US society, Seidman et al (2002) argue that lesbian and gay lives are no longer configured around the defining division between straight and gay worlds. Lesbian and gay identities have been integrated into regular patterns of social life and everyday discourse. Contrary to this argument, Hillier and Harrison (2007) stress that within Australian society ‘the closet is still a reality’ (p. 85), at least for many young LGBTQ-identifying people who encounter homophobic abuse and attitudes in significant relationships (Hillier et al, 2005). In support of this claim, the second national survey of LGBTQ youth in Australia indicates that 44% of 1,749 respondents (aged 14–21) reported experiences of verbal abuse, including name-calling and insults. Fifteen percent (15%) of young respondents reported physical abuse based on their sexuality (Hillier et al, 2005).

From early adolescence, many young people learn to conceal their same-sex attractions as a result of both anticipating or directly experiencing homophobic abuse and bullying (Britzman, 1997; Emslie, 1999; Telford, 2003). This entails learning how to remain vigilant of one's immediate surroundings and self-censor public displays of affection (Hillier et al, 2005). The routine process of concealing LGBQ sexualities and regulating one's actions can isolate young LGBQ people, weaken their sense of self-worth and impair their capacity to build support networks (Emslie, 1999; Hillier et al, 2005). In the present study, I examine younger LGBQ people's negotiations of the closet within the workplace.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

The primary purpose of the research was to generate a detailed description of young LGBQ people's experiences in the workplace and the aims were: 1) to learn how young people experience their place of employment as LGBQ-identifying workers; and 2) to examine how organisational dynamics impact on their working lives. Thirty-four (34) young people between the ages of eighteen to twenty-six participated in the research and shared their stories of previous and current employment. Participation was open to young people who were aged between sixteen and twenty-six, who defined their sexuality as non-heterosexual/ not straight; and who were willing to share their experiences of current or previous places of employment in Australia. The minimum age was set at sixteen years in line with university ethical requirements for young people to be able to consent autonomously to research participation. The maximum age was lifted to twenty-six years in recognition that these extra two years would allow a greater time-period to have elapsed for young people who had recently

completed tertiary education and were newcomers to continuing or permanent employment.

Using purposive sampling techniques, the project was advertised through a range of recruitment sources to ensure a diverse sample in gender, age and geographical location. This included queer and youth-related websites such as website postings and email lists, youth and health service providers, and hard copy advertisements displayed in LGB-social venues and locations on university campus. Potential participants were directed to a research website that outlined the specifications of the project. Recruitment procedures tended to yield an older population between the ages of 18 to 26 with an average of twenty-two (22). While the sample was skewed towards an older population this did not prevent older participants from reflecting on earlier work-experiences. While LGB-specific youth groups, websites and web lists across Australian states and territories were accessed as recruitment sources, no young people volunteered under the age of eighteen. This gap could reflect their limited experience in paid employment or their reluctance to discuss sexuality with an unfamiliar party at this point in their lifespan.

The sample group (18–26 years) were spread across all Australian states with no participant responses from the two territories (Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory). There was an almost equal number of men (n=18) and women (n=16) and the majority of young people (29) identified their current residential location as ‘urban’ while discussing former work-experiences in rural and regional areas in many cases. The sample encompassed a range of occupational groups and industries. Ten (10) major industries were identified from participants’ stories of current or most recent employment—Table 1 outlines the number of participants in each identified industry group and examples of job positions within each industry.

Participants were invited to discuss their first entry into paid employment as well as their current or more recent working-history. This highlighted varied patterns of engagement in either casual employment or fixed-term part-time and full-time employment across each young person's work narrative.

Young people self-selected to participate through web-based surveys, online interviews or face-to-face (FTF) interviews. Twelve participants completed web-based surveys while thirteen young people participated in online interviews and thirteen in face-to-face interviews. Deploying multiple methods ensured that participants had several options for participation while online methods were beneficial in accessing queer youth as a 'hard to reach' population who are not readily visible in the public arena. Prior studies indicate that the Internet is a prominent technology in the social and sexual lives of younger LGBTQ people (Hillier & Harrison, 2007).

Face-to-face and online interviews were led by a focussed, active interview approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) to generate reflections about participant's previous and current experiences of organisational cultures, relationships and practices. When interviewing, I commenced with a broad opening statement and question that was conducive to storytelling: *'Tell me about your experiences of the workplace... What it like is as a non-hetero / not straight worker in your workplace?'* This then led into a recursive series of questions in which I was guided by a list of topics from a pre-prepared theme list. Themes were developed from topics prominent in the workplace literature and from two pilot interviews: an online interview with a gay-identifying volunteer and a face-to-face interview with a lesbian-identifying volunteer. Topics included in the list were *formal / informal roles, disclosure at work, perceptions of organisational cultures, significant relationships within work, relationship to members of management, and life/work*

balance. The web-based survey contained open-ended questions adapted from the same list to ensure consistency across methods. The web-based survey consisted of open-ended questions that were developed from the theme list and uploaded onto the website. Online interviews were facilitated through a free-to-download instant messaging program. Most interviews ran between two to four meetings over several hours per meeting, requiring a longer period of engagement due to the requirement of responding in written text. This proved fruitful in allowing both participants and I time to reflect on our responses, and for follow-up and clarifying questions to be composed between scheduled meetings. FTF interviews were facilitated with participants chiefly located in the researcher's home-state and in some cases extended over several meetings to give sufficient time for participants to share their stories of working life.

Table 1. Number of participants in each identified industry group and examples of current or most recent job positions within each industry.

| Identified work industries | Number of participants within each identified work industry (N=34) | Examples of job positions occupied by participants in current or most recent employment |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Customer service & retail | Eight (8) | Car salesperson, computer salesperson, call centre consultant, sales assistant |
| Community, health & human services | Eight (8) | Additions counsellor, youth worker, family support worker, community project officer, out-of-school carer |
| Clerical & administration | Five (5) | Administration assistant, library officer, insurance claims consultant |
| Hospitality & service work | Five (5) | Bartender, waiter, kitchen hand, flight attendant, gaming attendant |
| Education, sport & recreation | Three (3) | Primary school teacher, swimming instructor |
| Manual labour & manufacturing | Two (2) | Cleaner, manufacturer |
| Public service | Two (2) | Legal advisor, ministerial writer |
| Information technologies | One (1) | Technology (interface) designer |

Note: ‘Most recent employment’ refers to participants who were not employed in paid work at the time of interviewing due to other life-events such as parenting responsibilities, tertiary education or transitions in employment.

Interview transcriptions were returned to the participants for their review before the transcripts were analysed thematically through the constructivist grounded theory method outlined by Charmaz (2006). This method applies the original techniques developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in a more open-ended and flexible approach that acknowledges the subjective presence of the researcher. The strength of this method is through its provision of clear guidelines for building analytic frameworks (Charmaz 2000). Coding techniques were applied with the electronic aid of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program *NVivo7* (QSR, 2006). I developed the data into thematic frames through the following stages of compilation: 1) initial coding; 2) focused and axial coding; 3) theoretical coding. Through the final process of theoretical coding, combined with the continual writing of memos to note conceptual links, each core category was refined and the relationships between sub-categories developed to convey a more nuanced story. Findings are presented as themes to decrease the risk of participants and their employers being identified by other audiencesⁱⁱ. The results of this analysis will now be outlined.

FINDINGS: YOUNG LGBTQ PEOPLE'S STORIES OF LABOURED SILENCES

The majority of young workers (30) within the sample-group were highly attuned to the threat of exclusionary practices— anti-homosexual practices of work-based abuse, discrimination and harassment (see Willis, 2009). This was based on both their witnessing *and* experiencing of heterosexist assumptions, abusive behaviours and discriminatory actions perpetrated by co-workers and members of management alike. Accordingly, nineteen (19) young people expressed their apprehension about breaking silence and making reference to their sexuality at work;

these young people did not feel it was safe to be visibly identified as LGBTQ-identifying employees. In this section, I elaborate on the processes through which young people sustained silence and invisibility at work then examine the three most prominent depictions of the closet contained within their workplace accountsⁱⁱⁱ.

Sustaining silence and invisibility at work

i) Monitoring and modifying speech and actions

Participants described the ways through which they sustained invisibility in the workplace—the concealing processes by which they regulated their speech and actions to ensure that LGB identities remained unidentifiable. The first key process entailed constantly monitoring and modifying their patterns of spoken communication. For seven (7) young people, this involved elaborate measures such as avoiding direct allusions to same-sex partners during work-conversations or by inserting gender-neutral pronouns when discussing significant people in their intimate lives with other adults. While working as a cleaner in an elderly retirement home, Alexis (21 years, casual employee) had agonised over how to participate in work conversations without accidentally revealing her partner's gender:

Alexis—What's frightening about not being out is the fact that I know that it's going to come out of my mouth sometime soon... It's hard talking about relationships without reflecting back on your own. Saying 'my ex' and then trying not to be gender specific is very hard for me... I feel sick to the base of my stomach when someone asks me if I have a boyfriend.

When working with children and adolescents, participants felt compelled to continually monitor both their actions and speech. This was to ensure that LGBTQ

sexualities remained invisible and to escape the critical gaze of parents, guardians and other colleagues that might position young LGBQ workers as dangerous subjects.

Five (5) young people explained how they sought to evade questions about their sexuality and same-sex relationships from curious children and adolescents. It was laborious work having to dodge these questions, as Madeleine (20 years, casual employee) discovered during her employment in an out-of-school care program. In this instance, other colleagues supported Madeleine in staying invisible as a 'gay'-identifying woman:

Madeleine—A couple of them have overheard something said between staff members and have directly asked me if I'm a lesbian or if by 'girlfriend' did I mean 'a girl who is your friend, or someone who you are going out with?'. That is always a bit scary... Sometimes I want to just be open and honest with the kids because if I don't, then who will? But then it's hard to know how parents will react.

Underlining young workers' anxiety about these questions was the fear of arising accusations about sexually inappropriate conduct from children's parents, carers and other staff. Participants expressed their horror at the potential association between their sexual identity and child sexual abuse:

Ingrid (23 years, full-time employee)—To be honest I think it's the connotation that often people put all non-heterosexual people in the same bucket as murderers, rapists and paedophiles... Like why not, you know, we often wield a sword and harm children! So I think that paedophilia aspect of it is something that really creeps me out, I mean that's the most horrendous thing I can think of being connected to my sexuality...

Four (4) young people described how they monitored their physical actions as well as speech while in the company of children. While working as a swimming instructor, Luke (19 years, casual employee) was ever-vigilant of the appraising gaze of parents watching over their children. His role required physical contact with children in the swimming pool:

Luke —like its bad enough having to deal with legal issues working with young children like where you have your hands and, you know, stuff like that and how hold you hold them in the water, and you have parents watching like a hawk, and the swimming establishment really focusing on you.

Participant's fears and anxieties are embedded in wider sociocultural associations between homosexual bodies and children's moral and physical safety, reiterating the dominant discursive effect of what McCreery (1999) describes as the 'discourse of endangered children'. Within this anti-homosexual discourse, queer bodies represent a supposed sexual threat to the 'moral and physical welfare of children' (p. 41). Children and adolescents are positioned as socio-political conduits through which oppressive messages of homosexual perversion and contamination find expression. This discourse in turn can reinforce the concealing practices of younger LGBQ workers.

ii) Playing it straight

A second process for sustaining invisibility involved the intricate practice of 'playing it straight': performing straight personas to ensure participants' safety and to provide reassurance to others. This was strikingly apparent in the stories of six (6) young men employed in masculine-dominated environments who felt obliged to

signify a heterosexual status to their male peers. In the words of Pearson (22 years), this performance involved: ‘...act[ing] really tough, don’t talk about guys, don’t talk about outside work stuff at all’. This was a common theme for primarily young men in this study.

For Luke, ‘playing it straight’ required making reference to imaginary girlfriends during his interactions with other male lifesavers and engaging with other young men’s expectations about staying on the ‘lookout’ for prospective girlfriends: ‘...neither of the other guys were seeing girls so it was sort of like, you know, young men always on the lookout for anyway they could get a girl...’

Three (3) young men described their attempts to ‘play it straight’ as situated performances within specific work environments. Some workspaces were experienced as distinctly more heterosexualised than others. Reflecting on his time employed by an airline company, Jack (25 years, part-time employee) described how his actions and speech differed between working in the feminised space of the front desk compared to working in the predominantly-male space of the cargo area:

Jack—But I actually found it quite interesting because I would notice within two minutes from working out the front and interacting with ‘my girls’ out the front, I’d walk out the back to do something... I would change [clicks fingers] just like that, the way I spoke would change and my mannerisms were changed and I would be much more blokey out the back [chuckles]. ... I didn’t consciously say ‘Ok, this is a high-risk situation, I need to be careful’, it was just an automatic change in my behaviour...

Jack discussed how he had regularly chosen to leave ‘gay-Jack’ at the door and play ‘straight-Jack’ instead, particularly if he was uncertain as to how other staff would

respond to his gay identity. This partitioning of workspaces into safe and unsafe environments highlights how young LGBTQ workers conform to heterosexual ideals in some environments but by no means all work-environments.

iii) Selective use of silence

The third process required the selective use of silence in work-conversations as another means of keeping LGBTQ identities invisible. Four (4) young people had overheard the religious opinions and prejudices voiced by other employees in the same organisation and consequently chose to stay silent about their sexuality.

Peggie's (23 years, full-time employee) older co-workers at the photographic shop had frequently expressed their moral disapproval of lesbian and gay sexualities during work conversations. As a result, Peggie was resolute that she was not going to share this intimate knowledge about her same-sex partner:

Peggie—I reckon it would have been very quiet 5 to 6 days every week [laughs] I don't reckon there would have been a lot of talking going on at all, I think I would have probably become the biggest bitch at work, I would have been so frustrated not being able to talk there I would have just been cranky at myself for saying something in the first place... I'm not going to sit there and be in debate with them because I had to work with them...

Peggie's perspective raises a significant point that despite the evidenced benefits of 'coming out' at work, the attitudes of co-workers and organisational culture remain prime considerations as to whether 'coming out' is a safe or realistic option.

Keeping silent was a preferred choice for some younger workers before feeling confident in speaking about same-sex attractions at work. Four (4) participants discussed their first experiences in the labour market during their mid to late-teens. This was typically in casual employment within the retail and service sectors whilst studying at secondary school, in line with wider youth employment trends in the Australian labour market (ABS, 2006). During this time, these young people had preferred not to discuss their sexuality with others while they were going through a process of making sense of their sexual differences. As Steven (24 years) states: 'I was still working things out in my head myself then'. Kat (21 years) described it as a 'pretty daunting task for anyone' when she was considering how to 'come out' to her family and friends before contemplating how she might have approached this issue at work. For young people who are relatively new to the 'coming out' process, discussing their sexuality at work could be a highly daunting task that takes less priority than assuring their safe and continual employment as new and casual workers.

Negotiating multiple closets in the workplace

Silence was an ever-present dimension throughout young people's accounts of negotiating work-environments that did not feel safe or inclusive towards LGBTQ sexualities. However, this was not an impenetrable silence as participants shared their stories of speaking about LGBTQ identities and, in their words, 'coming out' at work. The workplace closet functioned as a sheltered place from which to carefully 'reveal' LGBTQ identities as well as a protective place of concealment. The majority of young people in this study had communicated their preferred sexual identity to at least one other staff member; only three (3) participants had not spoken to anyone. Participants disclosed to various people, from select workmates through to the majority of staff.

While some young people received affirming and supportive responses, ‘coming out’ was by no means an easy process to manage nor did it automatically remove young workers from the confines of the workplace closet.

Coming out was a complex process to manage as the majority of young people bided their time to assess how others in the workplace might respond. For example, Jacob (26 years, full-time employee) had waited until sexuality-related issues had come up in conversations before speaking about his ‘gay’ to members of his research team while Tegan (26 years, casual employee) had tested her co-workers by ‘dropping hints in passing conversation’ to assess potential confidants. On some occasions, confidants selected themselves as safe candidates, for example, by asking respectful questions about their relationships outside of work. These positive interactions gave permission for young people to speak more candidly.

The following section elaborates on the three most prominent themes of silence reflected in the participant’s work-stories: i) sharing the closet with intimate partners, ii) signifying LGBQ identities through the closet and iii) the difficulties of escaping the closet.

i) Sharing the closet with intimate partners

A small number of participants (4) conveyed their experiences of occupying a shared closet in which their romantic relationships with other LGBQ-identifying employees were hidden from common knowledge. Sharing the silence, or what one young woman poignantly described as ‘loving in the shadows’, was emotionally hard work. Kat expressed her anguish about being in a same-sex relationship with her supervisor during her employment in a large retail store. It was a daunting challenge for Kat (21

years, casual employee) to keep her feelings to herself while having to witness other co-workers sympathise with her lover's more 'public' relationship:

Kat – It was hell! Not only was my lover my supervisor and therefore actually my boss (which was also exciting) but she was having a public relationship with one of the guys we worked with (she was his boss too)... Everything that happened between them everyone knew and would comment on! They'd be supportive of her and some of him. I had to keep it [same-sex relationship] secret, keep my feelings and my anguish to myself ... Now I knew that if I came out I'd lose her.

Kat's distress in this story was compounded by having to quietly listen to staff commentary about her lover's heterosexual relationship. This contrast illustrates the void between the public proclamation and acknowledgement of heterosexual relationships at work in comparison to same-sex relationships veiled in secrecy.

The shared closet was a fractious space for two colleagues to occupy at one time, occasionally resulting in one partner 'outing' the other. As relationships changed over time, so did each partner's requirement for privacy; these changes generated new stressors in young people's relationships. Ingrid (23 years, casual employee) felt like she was on the back foot when her ex-girlfriend, who was employed in the same department store, had suddenly decided to speak out about their relationship:

Ingrid—And so we [girlfriend and I] started working at the same time, trained together, working in the same department then broke-up and still working in the same department and then it became general knowledge, generally because [the ex-girlfriend] was having a bad day and she mentioned it to someone or brought it up,

and while I didn't care it still put me on the back foot because I didn't know how people were going to react...

While it could be argued that sharing the closet with another employee may bring opportunities for mutual support, Ingrid's story suggests otherwise—sharing the closet can generate additional tensions in young people's sexual relationships.

ii) Signifying LGBTQ identities through the closet

Several participants had located themselves within a semi-transparent closet: a sexually ambiguous space in which other staff members could potentially interpret their appearance, mannerisms and identities as signalling a LGBTQ identity. This alleviated the need to name their sexual identity aloud and potentially compromise their safety. Six (6) young people described the bodily and aesthetic signifiers, such as mannerisms, clothing and hairstyles, which they believed signalled LGBTQ identities to colleagues. Their descriptions primarily reflected essentialised understandings of homosexual identities as fixed and innate aspects of the human self (Rubin, 1984).

Moskoe (23 years, full-time employee) explained how he signalled his 'gay' sexuality through his mannerisms and speech: '...um probably the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I say things or certain words I use can be pretty obvious to people...'

However, not all work-audiences interpreted young people's actions as distinctly 'queer', illustrating the ambiguity of relying on the sexual assumptions of others. In spite of his 'gayed' mannerisms and intonation, this had not prevented an older co-worker from presuming Moskoe was 'straight':

Moskoe—We've had a woman here [at work] who's say forty-seven, for example, she didn't pick up on my gesticulations and stereotypical gay mannerisms and so I went

out for dinner for Valentine's Day, and she said something about in front of everyone, 'Well have fun with your girl!' ... and everyone was sort of looking round the table, because we were at a big long dinner table, thinking 'She doesn't get it!'

Moskoe's story illustrates how the presumption of heterosexuality in work-relationships can undermine young workers' attempts to indirectly signify and communicate non-mainstream sexualities.

iii) The difficulties of escaping the closet

A small group of participants discussed how difficult it was to escape the confines of the closet post-disclosure, as work colleagues greeted their disclosure with either silence or pained expressions that closed down further dialogue about sexuality. In this sense, silence also operated as an inescapable state in spite of having disclosed their sexuality at least once in their work-relationships or having been outed by others. Bruce (26 years, full-time employee) recounted how he had miscalculated the moment to 'come out' to his new male colleagues within a financial firm:

Bruce says: One of the graduates I was talking to at lunch was talking about how he will be moving to Fiji to work (the same organisation). Then I said that I wouldn't move there and explained about what happen to that Australian guy who was arrested and put in prison for having consensual sex with another man. After I mentioned it, they were just silent, and then the conversation changed. I wasn't sure what to think – ... Well, I wondered what they thought of me being gay.

Responding with silence can be a powerful way of rendering LGBTQ-identifying people's lives invisible, leaving the speaker in an agonising space of not knowing how

they are perceived. In a similar vein, Jack (25 years, casual employee) described the ‘thick air’ present in his interactions with the other kitchen staff after he had been ‘outed’ at a staff-barbecue the previous week:

Jack—... I noticed that the week after they [kitchen staff] were a bit kind of— I don’t know [pause] more stilted, like you’d have a conversation it was kind of a stilted or a difficult conversation as if they and I didn’t really know [pause] I don’t know, it was just that sort of really thick air between me and the guys ...

Other young people were greeted with responses of betrayal that made them regret their decision to ‘come out’. When two (2) young people did ‘come out’ to their respective colleagues they were greeted by pained expressions for not disclosing this information earlier, inducing a sense of culpability. This is illustrated in Maree’s (26 years, casual employee) story of working in a department store. Maree and her former girlfriend had not expected a hostile response when they had decided to speak to their workmates about their relationship:

Maree —....no one really reacted in a very positive way at that time... it was almost like some of our friends felt sort of betrayed by it, I don’t know, it was just sort of like ‘I don’t know who you are anymore’ ... just going ‘Oh my god, this is so horrible, and it’s affecting us!’ and we just couldn’t understand what was going on at that time, they were really hostile.

In these instances, ‘coming out’ was a catch-22 scenario in which the speaker felt compelled to ‘admit’ their sexuality to others and then, post-disclosure, was made to feel guilty because they were not ‘out’ earlier.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I set out to shed light on the concealing practices undertaken by younger LGBQ workers in the place of employment and to illustrate how younger LGBQ employees negotiate the workplace closet. Fundamentally, the findings show first, how the closet can be an organisational reality for young LGBQ-identifying workers and second, how labouring in silence at work can be an arduous undertaking for younger LGBQ employees. The findings indicate that the closet holds strategic, as well as silencing, functions in providing younger workers with a protective space from which to assess their work-relationships and context and to decide *if* and *how* they discuss their sexuality at work. This supports Ward & Winstanley's (2003) conclusions that silence as a 'negative space' (the space in which things are unsaid within organisational environments) can be experienced in multiple ways and hold varied meanings between workplace contexts and relationships.

Findings from the present study resonate with prior research on a number of ways. Similar concealing strategies have been reportedly relied upon by older same-sex attracted employees (Clair et al, 2005; Chrobot-Mason et al, 2001; Woods & Lucas, 1993) while Barron and Bradford (2007) have brought attention to the 'straight ontologies' or 'straight ways of being' (p. 47) adhered to by young gay men located in other hyper-masculinised environments, such as secondary school. The present study highlights how these gendered pressures permeate the work-relations of younger gay and bisexual men. The relationship-tensions generated from sharing silence in the same workplace is an illuminating finding as it expands on previous studies that focus on the 'coming out' tensions between partners employed in separate organisations (Rostosky & Riggle, 2002). The present study brings attention to the stressors shared between sexual partners employed in the *same* workspace. While arguably sharing the

closet with another employee may increase opportunities for mutual support, this finding suggests that sharing the closet can generate further relationship tensions. The high level of secrecy surrounding same-sex relationships also re-emphasises the lack of safe spaces and positive acknowledgment available to young LGQB people in developing early romantic relationships (Russell et al, 2001).

From their foundational research into corporate workspaces, Woods & Lucas (1993) discussed how gay male employees presented themselves as sexually ambiguous to conceal their sexuality. In the present study, younger participants were not intending to completely conceal their sexuality which suggests a divergence from reported strategies of gay men seeking to 'pass' as heterosexual (Woods & Lucas, 1993). The preparedness of young LGBQ employees to signal their sexuality through non-verbal communication and presentation may reflect a generational difference between younger and older employees. This tallies with wider proposed trends that queer youth in other economically advantaged nations, including the US and Norway, are more likely to identify with LGBQ identities and reach sexual milestones at an earlier age in adolescence than previous generations (Drasin, Beals, Elliot, Lever & Klein, 2008; Giertsen & Anderssen, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005). However, similar to their older counterparts, these younger workers still had to contend with the persistent presumption of heterosexuality.

Signalling LGBQ sexualities at work may be a far more appealing prospect for some younger people than having to verbally disclose this information. A small subset of younger people discussed how they were too busy 'working out' their sexuality in their mid-teens to grapple with identity disclosure. For young workers located in 'precarious' and casualised employment (White & Wyn 2008), keeping silent about their sexuality may be a higher priority than facing potential threats to their ongoing

employment. Schmidt & Nilsson (2006) propose that an internalised focus on sexual identity development may supersede young LGBQ people's attention to career development. Conversely, young LGBQ people in mid-adolescence may maintain a more rigid focus on their paid employment and future careers, and not allow their sexual identity to interfere with their employability.

Negotiating the three distinct closet-spaces evidenced in this paper suggests a more complex level of decision-making than simply deciding whether to be 'in' or 'out' at work. Theoretically, the different ways in which participants experienced the workplace closet gives weight to previous analyses of the closet as an unstable and multi-dimensional space (Butler, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Mason, 2002). Approaching the closet as inescapable space resonates with Sedgwick's (1990) stance that 'coming out' does not terminate 'anyone's relation to the closet' but instead can strengthen the 'power-circuits' of silence (p. 81). It also illustrates how the contradictory logic of the closet can be an impossible process to manage for LGBQ workers in general, let alone younger workers who are in the early stages of their career development.

Findings from this qualitative study are limited in generalisability and therefore not readily transferable to other organisational contexts. Furthermore, this research has relied on a convenience sample that is diverse in gender representation and occupation but contains gaps in illustrating the work-experiences of gender variant youth and the participation of young people in trade industries. Relying on computer-mediated methods may prevent some young people who feel less confident with computer-literacy from participating. Likewise, advertisements for recruitment may have also prevented young people who express and describe their sexuality outside terminology such as 'same-sex attracted' or 'non-heterosexual' from participating. This highlights the procedural difficulties of deploying an inclusive

language that strikes familiarity with a sexually diverse population. While a range of venues were accessed for advertising, a predominant focus on LGB social spaces and related websites, may not have captured the attention of sexually diverse youth who do not identify with conventional identity categories and sexual minority communities.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Negotiating the shifting boundaries between visibility and invisibility within the workplace context represents a secondary process of labour that is not required or expected of heterosexual employees. This is a burdensome responsibility for young people as newcomers to the labour market who have limited experience in forging work-relationships and navigating their way through organisational hierarchies and politics. It is unreasonable to expect younger workers to effectively perform their appointed work-roles while seeking to stay invisible as LGBQ-identifying employees and to avoid homophobic attitudes and responses. It also compromises the entitlement of LGBQ workers to participate in meaningful and safe employment and, like other social settings, may adversely affect their psychosocial development and mental wellbeing (D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Huebner et al, 2004; McDermott, Roen & Scourfield, 2008). Occupying the workplace closet can also impede young people's attempts to develop social networks at work as well as reducing their likelihood of seeking support from senior staff when required. At the same time, the closet may be a necessary and temporary space for some young people who do not feel included as LGBQ employees or who need time to assess their work-relationships and environment.

There are a number of strands for further research based on this discussion. A more nuanced study of young people first seeking and entering employment in their adolescence would assist in understanding the prominence of sexual identity in their initial perceptions of job-seeking and vocational planning. Similarly, there is scope for further research into how patterns of concealment and disclosure change as adolescents and younger people acquire work-experience and move from casualised to more secure employment in their career trajectories. Finally, there is a need for broader recognition of young people's agency in locating supportive colleagues and connecting with other LGBT workers in spite of the barriers constructed through the silencing of diverse sexualities at work.

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ⁱ When invited to describe their sexuality, the majority of young people participating in this research referred to the sexual identity markers *lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer* or a combination of these social identities. The abbreviation LGBQ will be used in line with participants' choice of language.

ⁱⁱ Identifying details, such as business or organisational names and locations, have been removed from the data for the purposes of anonymity. The first names are pseudonyms nominated by participants.

ⁱⁱⁱ Information provided in brackets for each participant indicates 1) age at the time of research participation and 2) their status at the time of employment. For the purpose of this study, employment status is categorised as either full-time and part-time (indicating fixed-term employment) or casual (indicating non-fixed term employment without entitlement to sick or holiday leave).